

## MAJOR MACDONALD, A VICTORIAN ROMANTIC

By JOHN D. COONEY

A FEW years ago, while working with the reserve collections of Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum, I stumbled across traces of a man, almost utterly unknown, who deserves a more prominent place in the annals of Egyptology than it has yet been his fate to achieve. The man is Major C. K. Macdonald, the first excavator of Serabit el-Khadim, Petrie's predecessor by almost six decades. His obscurity, though regrettable, is understandable for he appears to have published only one brief notice<sup>1</sup> and very little has been published about him. After diligent search I have found only six references to him in Egyptological literature, all of them relatively obscure.

The very little we know of Macdonald as a man was recorded chiefly by Heinrich Brugsch.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, outside the illiterate Bedouin who worked for him, Brugsch is our sole first-hand authority or at least the only one known to the writer. He records that Macdonald was born in the Hebrides. As he mentioned that at the time of his visit (before 1866) the Major appeared to be about forty-five, the date of his birth would have been around 1818 to 1820. He was a professional soldier, serving as major in the English cavalry. His military career could probably be reconstructed from records in Somerset House, but it is improbable that they would have any relation to his Egyptological activities.

His memory still lingered among the local Bedouin in Petrie's day, early in the present century. Petrie wrote sympathetically of the man and his work, but it is clear that Petrie had no knowledge of his excavations.<sup>3</sup> Apparently no part of his collection in the British Museum was ever exhibited or published, and, thus, knowledge of the collection or of Macdonald's achievements would come to light only on consulting the early registers in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities. In his catalogue of the Alnwick Castle Collection, Birch does make passing mention of Macdonald and his excavations, but I imagine that is a work seldom consulted these days.<sup>4</sup>

Macdonald's first visit to Sinai took place in early April 1845, only a few days after the departure of the Lepsius expedition. At that time Sinai was invariably called Arabia and, indeed, both geographically and geologically it is an extension of the great Arabian land mass. Prior to going to Sinai his whereabouts are unclear, but as it is recorded

<sup>1</sup> Georg Ebers, *Durch Gosen zum Sinai* (Leipzig, 1872), 136 n. 90, where some brief notices are said to have appeared in the English periodical *Athenaeum*, May 1859. When this publication was available to me, my time was limited and a hasty search failed to locate the reference. Probably it is not of great importance.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Brugsch, *Wanderung nach den Türkis-Minen und der Sinai-Halbinsel* (Leipzig, 1866), 66-9. I owe both this reference and the above to the kind co-operation of Miss Eleanor Wedge, Librarian of the Wilbour Library of Egyptology of the Brooklyn Museum.

<sup>3</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai* (New York, 1906), 7, 20, and 53. See also fig. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Birch, *Catalogue of the Collection of Egyptian Antiquities at Alnwick Castle* (London, 1880), 179.

(Brugsch) that he travelled with his wife in Egypt, it is probable that he went to Sinai from Egypt.

His penetration of the peninsula can be traced with considerable certainty thanks to the records made at the British Museum by Samuel Birch in 1849. His first stop seems to have been made at Moses' Well some twelve miles south of Suez. There he made a surface find of a fragment of a blue faience shawabti still preserving six lines of text. He then struck inland to Serabit el-Khadim in the south-central section of Sinai. One gathers this was his main objective, the land of the turquoise mines and the great Temple of Hathor, the Lady of the Turquoise. There he must have remained for a considerable time as he excavated over four hundred objects in the temple area. He had the time and leisure to make a very large collection of squeezes of the now famed inscriptions in the area, some of which no longer exist. At a rough estimate, his sojourn in the temple area would have occupied four to six months. His next objective was the well-known Wadi Maghara south-west of Serabit. There his interest was exploration, doubtless by camel with Bedouin guides. His finds from Maghara are just what one would expect, surface finds, chiefly spear-heads and other weapons, hand tools, and stone implements. Such objects are difficult to date but are of interest chiefly to pre-historians. One doubts that he remained long in this starkly desolate area. His next objective was Mt. Sinai south-east of Maghara, but whether his interest at that famed site was archaeological, geographical, or ecclesiastical, is no longer evident. Beyond the discovery of a single unimportant specimen, certainly a surface find, we have no information on his activities there. From Mt. Sinai Macdonald seems to have travelled almost due west to Tor at the coast. It is recorded, apparently on Macdonald's authority, that four objects, copper fragments, were found in a mountain range between Mt. Sinai and Tor. With this sketchy reference to Tor our knowledge of the Major's itinerary in Sinai ceases. He may well have visited other sites from which no antiquities were forthcoming, and so no record has come down to us. At one end or the other of this exploration the Major was at Saqqâra, for we do have a record of the antiquities he acquired at that famed site. They are not an impressive lot. The group includes only eight pieces. From the brief entry one gathers that Macdonald excavated them. They include a bronze statuette of an Apis bull, a bronze cat, a bronze ibis, a terracotta statuette of Isis holding Horus, and, dear to the Victorians, a jar holding corn—presumably ancient.

With this brief record our knowledge of Macdonald's archaeological activities almost ends. Presumably, he returned to England where he seems to have had a home. This return would have been in 1846 or 1847. At all events he next appears, briefly, in August 1849, when he presented all his Sinai finds and his important collection of squeezes to the British Museum. This was perhaps the first excavated group of material to enter the Department of Egyptian Antiquities. It was carefully recorded by the great Samuel Birch. His scholarship was so sound that even today, well over a century after he catalogued this material, it is only rarely that one can make a significant addition to an entry.

There follows a considerable gap in our knowledge of Macdonald's activities. Petrie records that the Major together with his wife returned to Maghara in 1854 to mine for

turquoise. The source of his information is not given, but I wonder if this date is correct. The reason I question it is that in April 1857, Macdonald put his art collection up for sale at Sotheby's in London.<sup>1</sup> A man of his temperament would part with his collection only under necessity. It seems to me that he took this step to finance his mining venture in Sinai and I suggest that he did not reach Sinai until later that year. The long title of the catalogue records that the collection was 'formed by Major Macdonald during his travels in Egypt, Arabia, Syria and Greece'. It was a very miscellaneous collection and, it must be admitted, a not very distinguished one. Clearly the Major was an eclectic and a romantic. A gold funerary wreath from Corcyra was one of the better items. There were medieval sculptures, armour, jades, Palissy ware, majolica, many ancient gems, Roman glass, some dubious medieval ivories, etc. There were also some Egyptian antiquities, apparently not from his excavations, of minor importance. A few of these were bid in by the British Museum. The sale netted £778. 10s. 6d. With this sum in hand and possibly other funds he departed for the desolate site of Wadi Maghara together with his wife. He was never to see England again.

On reaching his goal his first act was to build himself a house. Raised by Bedouin labour, the house was made from local stone, its beams being palm logs. Brugsch reports that Macdonald lived in it in fair comfort. In Petrie's time the building still stood. At all events the house so enchanted the local people by its novelty that they at once copied it and so formed a cluster of dependencies around the feudal centre.

In searching for turquoise Macdonald was, of course, following the trail of the Egyptians who mined there from a very early date to the late New Kingdom. Considering this prolonged and intensive exploitation of the turquoise deposits by the Egyptians it is curious how very rarely one finds any ancient object made of turquoise apart from jewellery inlays chiefly of Middle Kingdom date. In Macdonald's day, the reign of Victoria, the turquoise was very much in vogue. It later went out of fashion and was a drug on the market. In the last few years it has again become fashionable. Clearly had Macdonald succeeded in finding and mining this stone, his enterprise would have been profitable. But he was doomed to failure. He continued his venture until 1866 when he gave up. Curiously he did not return to England but migrated back to Serabit where he lived for another year. What did he do there? Probably he again excavated, but if so we have no information on the results. On leaving there he retired to Cairo—a strange choice for it was well before the existence of a sizeable English colony in that city. Not much of life was left to him, for Ebers<sup>2</sup> and others record that he died there in 1870 in poverty. A sad and frustrating story.

Although Macdonald was probably the first to attempt the reopening of an ancient mine, he certainly had successors later in the century. Several attempts were made at various gold sites to mine what the Egyptians had abandoned, and even an emerald

<sup>1</sup> *Sale Catalogue, Major Macdonald Collection* (Sotheby, London, April 20–2, 1857).

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. 136. His exact phrase is 'on the brink of poverty'. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Cooke's Handbook for Egypt and the Sudan* (1905), 498, where he remarks of Macdonald that 'commercially his venture was a failure and he subsequently died in Egypt, a ruined man'. E. H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus, Journey on Foot in the Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1871), 167, 'where he (Macdonald) died a ruined and disappointed man'.

deposit (probably beryl) exploited anciently was unsuccessfully worked. All these ventures failed and for a very simple reason. The Egyptians were expert miners and quarrymen and apparently never gave up a site until they had exhausted its possibilities. In Sinai the Egyptians seem to have mined for turquoise from at least the Fourth Dynasty to the end of the New Kingdom, a very long stretch of time. Turquoise is not found in great masses, but as an inclusion or vein in other stones. In the vast majority of cases the deposits are much too thin and small to have any commercial uses. The larger and profitable veins would be conspicuous and readily detected by the ancients. Undoubtedly this depletion of the turquoise supply in Sinai explains why the site and the great Temple of Hathor, Lady of the Turquoise, were abandoned after the Twentieth Dynasty. The goddess could no longer live up to her epithet.

One would suppose that a long sojourn in this isolated area would have had a disastrous and neurotic effect on the Major. But Brugsch, who was his guest, paints a very different picture. The Major seems to have had a wonderful time. He loved animals, particularly cats and dogs, kept birds and several tamed specimens of the local fauna. In true desert tradition his house was open to any stranger and of his table Brugsch remarked that for the place it 'was Lucullan'. Clearly he commanded the respect and affection of his workers. Brugsch records that in addition to English, his mother tongue, Macdonald spoke French and Arabic 'as well as other languages'. As with so many other individuals of his time and today, he was tied to a task which did not greatly interest him, mining for turquoise, while his real passion was archaeology. Apparently he did pick up some knowledge of the ancient language. Again with Brugsch as our authority, his 'joy was to study archaeology. His work was to mine for turquoise.'

Ebers, who visited the site in 1871, spoke equally well of the ill-fated seeker of turquoise. He had probably read Brugsch's account, but he also had information from the locals who had worked with Macdonald. They confirmed that he had indeed died in poverty on his return to Cairo. Ebers generously records his regret that with his detailed geographical knowledge of the area and his considerable archaeological knowledge Macdonald had published almost nothing. He recounts the touching story of Blackie, the Major's cat, who continued to live in his master's house after his departure from the area.

Macdonald's adherence to sanity is comprehensible; he at least had the support of his work to fall back on, a staff to any man, but what of his wife, a shadow of a shadow to us? One can think of few more desolate regions for a well-bred English lady to dwell in than the Wadi Maghara. The boredom and loneliness on top of financial difficulties would cause madness or virtually insoluble psychiatric problems. But she remains a wraith. Even her maiden name is unknown. In a context far from clear Petrie seems to record that the Macdonalds had a son, William.

Clearly, Macdonald was one of the long line of British, male and female, who were intoxicated with the exotic civilizations of the East. Between them they produced the world's greatest travel literature for they were for the most part well born, well educated, and exceptionally able with the pen. Macdonald, while of them, was apart from them. He seems to have had no particular interest or ability in writing, but was more interested

in action. But surely as a good Victorian of presumably good background (as all officers were in those days) he must have kept a diary, a solid Victorian practice. Perhaps it is still in existence somewhere with his descendants—assuming that he did have a son, William.

So much for the man, though there is a chance that this article may attract additional information. Turning to the collections now in the British Museum, we note that they closely parallel those found by Petrie at a later date, but with one interesting exception. Petrie found not a scrap of glass in his Sinai excavations while Macdonald discovered about seventy pieces—all fragments of New Kingdom vessels which presumably had been presented to Hathor perhaps filled with scented ointments. The find includes a few fragments of Egyptian blue.<sup>1</sup>

The date range of objects with royal inscriptions, chiefly of stone and faience, commences with Hatshepsut and ends with Ramesses IV, inscriptions dedicated to the latter being particularly frequent. Virtually every king between these two reigns is represented. Two fragments of tan limestone join (14382) and preserve part of an inscription, 'Lord of diadems, Merenptah, satisfied in truth, beloved of Hathor (mistress of . . .)'. The fragment seems to be from the corner of a pedestal presumably for a statue of this king. Another fragment recorded as part of the pedestal just described is apparently from another pedestal dedicated to the same king, for one end of a cartouche preserves a ram. This inscription was inlaid with Egyptian blue when excavated, but only faint traces now remain. The earliest royal inscription found by Macdonald existed on the shaft of a faience votive *menat*, originally blue, now green (13207). When Birch recorded it, it bore the prenomen of Hatshepsut and stated that she was 'beloved (of Hathor)'.

Numerous faience fragments are inscribed for kings, chiefly of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. They include bracelets, amulets, strap handles, and sections of bowls. Fragments bearing the name of Ramesses III are particularly frequent. On the whole these faience objects are not of fine quality. An exception is a disc cover (13214) of a cylindrical jar or toilet box. It is made of a very compact, hard faience glazed in fine lavender blue, surely of the reign of Amenophis III. On the underside is a lip to keep the cover in place. On the top surface within a border of light green triangles was a register of antelopes, also in pale green, represented in the flying gallop and looking backwards. At the centre is a floral motif. The top surface has discoloured, but the under surface remains the fine original colour. This fragment is all that survives of what must have been a minor masterpiece of Egyptian ceramic art. See pl. XLV.

Of private monuments the earliest is probably a fragmentary seated sandstone statuette of a man (14367). He sits on a relatively high base, his feet folded under him. He wears a long skirt, an inscription on its lower edge with another directly below on the top of the base. Already in Birch's day both inscriptions were illegible. The interest of this sculpture is that the man's hands are represented with palms upward, a relatively rare detail studied by the late Professor Hermann Ranke some years ago. The date

<sup>1</sup> Published in detail in *Catalogue of Egyptian Glass in the British Museum* (or similar) by the writer. In manuscript.



Fragmentary statuette (B.M. 14367)

*Courtesy of the British Museum*



Faience disc cover, c. 1400 B.C. (B.M. 13214)

FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF MAJOR MACDONALD NOW IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

must be Twelfth Dynasty. A small sandstone stela (8509) was probably a stock piece of the New Kingdom. A man wearing a short skirt stands at the right, his right arm extended towards a seated deity. Between them is an offering table piled with bread and lotus flowers, the latter only a distant memory from Egypt. There is no evidence that the stela was ever inscribed. A fragment (13357) of a grey steatite base inscribed for the 'King's scribe, the Overseer of works, the King's messenger . . .' was made in Egypt and sent to the shrine, possibly by this official who may well have been posted there. Fragments of stone, usually alabaster, vessels are numerous. Some have royal inscriptions. The only one calling for special comment is a fragment in alabaster apparently from a chalice-shaped cup with lotus petals in relief on the outer surface. Duplicates are known. Light blue faience figures of cats spotted black, all incomplete, are in the collection as are various amulets, some of them certainly of late date though it seems established that the Temple of Hathor in Sinai was not occupied after the New Kingdom. A 'copper mason's chisel' known to the writer only from the entry in the Register recalls the similar tool inscribed for Cheops found in the Nubian diorite quarry. This example is from Serabit el-Khadim. Another piece not seen by the writer was recorded by Palmer.<sup>1</sup> He wrote, 'I have since seen in the British Museum a beautifully executed female foot, carved in black stone which formed part of the collection of curiosities found by the late Major Macdonald in this very spot (i.e. Serabit el-Khadim).'

Such was Macdonald's contribution to Egyptology—a not inconsiderable achievement for an amateur. Had his finds been published before Petrie's work appeared early in this century, he would have been assured an honoured place in the annals of Egyptology. When we recall that his work in Sinai was well in advance of even Mariette's researches, his advocate could, with considerable justice, acclaim him as the first excavator in Egypt with any semblance of a scientific approach in his work.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* 193.